

# Painterly Romance: Amy Beager

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Millie Walton



Fashion designer-turned-artist Amy Beager draws on the visual language of fairytales and mythology to create vivid, swirling scenes that teeter on the edge of reality and dream.

Here, she chats to Millie Walton about notions of beauty, the physicality of paint and London's art scene.

### **Where did it all begin for you?**

I have loved painting since I can remember, and wanted to be an artist when I was studying art at school. Then, during my art foundation course I was encouraged to do my BA in an art-related subject that would give more secure career prospects. It was probably partly due to lack of confidence and knowledge of how to be an artist that led me to do my BA in Fashion Design. After working in the fashion industry for 7 years I quit my full-time job as a womenswear designer and worked freelance whilst building up my art practice. It was always my dream to make a living as an artist and felt it was the right time for me to try. I have been painting and exhibiting my work as a fine artist for two years.

### **How has your style or approach to making art evolved since graduating?**

As mentioned previously, I did a BA in Fashion Design and worked as a womenswear designer after graduating. So, for a while, I wasn't making any paintings, I was designing womenswear and doing some fashion illustration work. I suppose my background in fashion has influenced my paintings because of the things I learnt and experienced whilst working as a designer. I learnt a lot about colour and building texture which translates to my work now. There was a lot of sourcing imagery involved as well: researching online for second-hand images, visiting exhibitions or going on shopping trips to places such as Seoul and Berlin to search for inspiration for the next collection. With my paintings, I work in a similar way, using second-hand images I find in fashion photography, classical sculptures, cemetery sculptures or stills from theatres or movies.

Recently, I have been researching Victorian theatre photographs of 'Romeo & Juliet' and images from the Staglieno and Bonaventure cemeteries in Italy. I still enjoy researching and I have an archive of images on my computer that I often refer to. It's the same principle with design to making art, taking bits from all different sources of inspiration that you are gathering up (consciously and subconsciously) and creating narratives in your own visual language.



Installation view of Amy Beager: *Dreamers* at Wilder Gallery © Demelza Lightfoot Photography

### **What do you see as the core principles or components of your practice?**

I mostly combine figuration with expressive abstraction. It is something that many artists have done before and are doing now in individual ways. I think expressive distortion, figuration and abstract forms are what I feel most concerned about within my practice at the moment.

### **How much do you plan your compositions?**

I usually plan where I will position any figures within the painting, sometimes I will have a clear vision of the overall shapes within the composition but other times it's quite vague and develops through the painting process. If I see a narrative forming that I like whilst painting I will explore this, so sometimes it can be different to what I had first envisioned. Colour, line and texture are all dictated during the process so I won't really have any idea what this should be before starting the painting. I don't like to plan too much as I find it much more enjoyable and exciting to experiment and I find that it helps with keeping a freedom and energy within the painting.

### **What's your relationship to paint as an artistic material?**

I love it! I enjoy experimenting with different techniques, brushstrokes, thicknesses. Using acrylic for the first half of the painting enables me to work quickly and build up the foundations of the painting in terms of colours, negative space and details. Some of these

layers and details will be visible, but most will usually be worked over with oil. I love the physicality of making marks with paint and the freedom of being able to create unlimited amounts of painterly effects, and exploring the contradictions of silky, velvety, smooth textures mixed with rough, drippy or translucent layers of paint. It's just fun to work with.





### **Have you always been interested in mythology?**

The source of inspiration for my earlier works (2019-2020) started with reading the memoir of Isadora Duncan, who herself had a deeply tragic story. The book, entitled *My Life*, is very poetic and her spirit was really inspiring to me. She was influenced by greek sculptures, mythology and beauty ideals, which lead me to research into these and learn more about for my own inspiration. Mythology is interesting to me because they are stories that combine realities in terms of emotion and meaning, but the characters are deities – extraordinary and otherworldly.

### **What drives your choices of colour?**

Colour is very important. For me, it is what instantly evokes the mood as a viewer. Key colours that I personally find most attractive are quite bold, vivid and I can't think of the perfect word to describe them other than kind of 'juicy'. Again, my fashion background comes into context here as it was always nearly impossible to get fabrics in the exact colour you wanted and for the colour to be really rich and vibrant. It's part of what I love most about paint, being able to mix up any colour imaginable and how rich, pure and beautiful it is.

I think the balance of colour is key – which colours you are choosing to put next to each other and how this can create tension and drama or harmony and fluidity within the composition. It's interesting to play around with and I like to choose colours quite instinctively and layer them up. I will then edit later to balance the final palette. I am really loving the combination of vibrant lemon yellow with the flamingo pink and lilac at the moment. Pink is usually at the core of my paintings.

### **Your work is often described as “romantic” in the sense that it engages with notions of beauty and love and describes a certain emotional intensity. What interests you in those particular themes or moods?**

Beauty and love are things that I value highly in life (and are perhaps what most people want or long for in one way or another?). I'm not referring to 'beauty' as a stereotype or societal standard. Things are determined as 'beautiful' by a person because of an attraction, because something about it or them is attractive to you and you have a positive emotional connection to whatever it is. In turn, notions of beauty relate to feelings of love and belonging. Mythology, fairytales, tragic love stories and movies that I love often have themes of unrequited love or death. For me, it's this idea of loss of love and beauty that is heartbreaking.

### **Can you tell us more about your current exhibition and specifically the idea of “Bed Paintings”?**

My current exhibition, entitled *Dreamers*, is a collection of works that explore ideas of desire, longing, love as well as death and loneliness. The figures are reduced down through variations of brushstrokes and swooping clouds of colour evoking a dreamlike and subjective reality. Beds are the gateways to dreams or portals into another world. It is a place where you experience love and security, but also loneliness, loss and death. It's the first opportunity I've had to show my works IRL in a solo exhibition so it's really exciting!



Installation view of *Amy Beager: Dreamers* at Wilder Gallery © Demelza Lightfoot Photography

**Some of the works, especially the diptychs, are rendered at a large scale. How do you think this impacts on the experience of the work?**

Yes, it was amazing to have the space and opportunity to be able to show a number of larger paintings. I think the large scale allows the viewing experience to be more encompassing. Working on a larger scale enables me to create large gestural marks with urgency and immediacy, where areas of colour can flood through the image. I like to use negative space, line and colour blocking to direct the viewer's eye around the canvas. It allows me to work more loosely and freely in a way.

**Do you see yourself as working within a particular artistic lineage? Who do you think of as your major influences?**



It is difficult to pin point exactly. One of the first paintings I saw that really impacted me was whilst I was studying for my art A-Level. It was Peter Doig's *Canoe Lake* at the Saatchi Gallery. I loved the graphic lines and vibrant colours but also the narrative. The swampy, cadaver-like figure slumped in the canoe and the little cabin hidden in the trees. This memory could be what I associate green colours with and why I love using them in my own work, because of how I felt looking at Doig's painting. To me, the atmosphere he creates in that work is incredible and hauntingly beautiful.

**When you were first starting out, what was your impression of the London art scene and has that changed at all?**

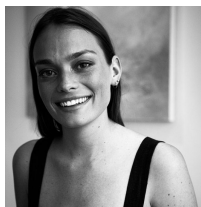
Well, I have only been painting for a couple of years, so I don't have too much experience to be able to comment on any changes, but when I was studying art at college, I thought that unless you had connections or studied at a prestigious art institution, it would be very difficult to make it a career and more importantly, make a living out of it. It felt very closed off and far away from me. Without social media I would probably still feel the same today. Now, because anyone can share their work through Instagram it can be easier to connect with galleries and curators. This is how I started: by sharing my work on Instagram and following galleries that fitted with my style, researching and applying to open calls and looking for opportunities. I think there are lots of great galleries that are representing and supporting emerging artists in London.

**What's next for you?**

I have been really busy with exhibitions all year, so I'm having a short break from painting at the moment so I can take some time to rest. I have some exhibitions coming up next year including a solo presentation with a London gallery in March that I'm really excited about! I also have a residency in the Netherlands in spring that was supposed to happen earlier this year but had to be rescheduled due to travel restrictions so, I am really looking forward to finally being able to go.

*Amy Beager's solo exhibition "Dreamers" runs until 20 October 2021 at Wilder Gallery, 77 College Road, London NW10 5ES. For more information, visit: [wilder.gallery](http://wilder.gallery)*

Featured Image: Amy Beager, *Cure for Heartache*, 2021



Millie Walton

Millie Walton is a London-based art writer and editor. She has contributed a broad range of arts and culture features and interviews to numerous international publications, and collaborated with artists and galleries globally. She also writes fiction and poetry.